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Making space for activism studies in public relations curricula

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to stimulate debate about public relations education and its curricula. It questions why, when prominent public relations theorists are establishing a developing relationship between activism and public relations, is this research not reflected in public relations curricula? The functionalist approach (where public relations is taught as a neutral organisational function) is endorsed by public relations' powerful credentialising bodies, and strongly influences the content of public relations' educational objectives. Rather than allow this functionalism to dominate curricula objectives, public relations teachers, as professionals, have a responsibility to deconstruct public relations practice and critique the role it plays in society. This article proposes that incorporating activism studies into public relations curricula provides an opportunity for public relations teachers to navigate this complexity. In addition, incorporation of activism studies in public relations curricula has the potential to provide a platform for public relations to consolidate its position as a progressive field of knowledge and practice in a dynamic and complex environment.

1. Introduction

Public relations theorists increasingly acknowledge the intersection of public relations and activism as a legitimate field of study. Activists' motivations, strategies and tactics are being positioned as examples of public relations practice (Adi, 2018; Ciszek, 2015; Dhanesh & Sriramesh, 2019; Toledano, 2016; Wolf, 2019), as a way of disrupting practice and fostering critical perspectives (Coombs & Holladay, 2012a; Weaver, 2018), and as a way of broadening the social legitimacy of the public relations profession (Ciszek, 2015; Coombs & Holladay, 2012a, 2012b; Demetrious, 2013; Holtzhausen, 2013; L'Etang, 2016). While there is increased theorising about the nature of the relationship between activism and public relations practice, this is neither widely reflected in public relations curricula except where activism is treated as oppositional to public relations objectives (Coombs & Holladay, 2013), and nor is there discussion about what this theorising means for public relations pedagogy.

Over a decade ago L'Etang and Pieczka (2006) called for a radicalisation of the public relations curriculum, and Wright and VanSlyke Turk (2007) called for public relations teachers to become more influential in shaping their own destiny. Responding to these calls has proved challenging. One of the key reasons for this is that public relations pedagogy remains focussed on the field's quest for legitimacy as a profession, and associated issues of credentialisation (Fitch, 2016; L'Etang & Pieczka, 2006; L'Etang, 2016). Reflective public relations teachers

face a professional tension between their informative role, which seeks to support the profession, and their transformative role, which seeks to deconstruct and influence practice and give voice to those less powerful. Despite the emergence of critical approaches to public relations, these have had limited influence on the practice or, of particular importance to this article, the teaching of public relations (Dozier & Lauzen, 2000; Edwards, 2015; Fitch, 2016; L'Etang & Pieczka, 2006; Moloney, 2006).

This article proposes that incorporating activism studies as a field in public relations curricula could contribute to loosening the constraints of the functionalist approach that has dominated public relations pedagogy, and could incorporate a more emancipatory element into public relations teaching. It begins by giving an overview of the emerging body of theory that analyses the changing relationship between public relations and activism. It then addresses some of the professional tensions faced by public relations teachers. Finally, it considers initial steps toward incorporating activism studies into public relations curricula. It is important to acknowledge that this article is written from a Western, pluralist perspective; public relations practice and teaching are always situated within a specific political, sociocultural, economic and media context.

2. Public relations and activism – a theoretical conflation

This section examines the emerging body of theory that reconsiders and endorses the relationship between public relations and activism.

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This is important because, until recently, the activities of activists were considered to be outside the scope of public relations theory and practice, except where positioned as oppositional to that practice. Now the possibility that activist strategies and tactics can be perceived as legitimate, even exemplary, forms of public relations activity is increasingly accepted, at least on a theoretical level.

Any discussion about the changing relationship between activists and public relations practitioners, and the implications of this change for public relations curricula, must be placed within the context of a deep theoretical divide related to the context and objectives of public relations. This is the divide between a functionalist approach that focuses on the “day to day thoughts, actions, and preoccupations of practitioners” (Dozier & Lauzen, 2000, p. 4), and a critical/pro-social approach. Cutlip, Center, and Broom’s (1994) highly influential definition of public relations positions the field as a management function that aims to establish and maintain “mutually beneficial relationships between an organisation and the publics on whom its success or failure depends” (p. 6). From this functionalist perspective it is possible to view public relations as a set of morally neutral, strategic communication tools aimed primarily at achieving organisational objectives. Dimitrov (2017) makes the point that public relations practitioners are generally unaware that they are practising within the functionalist paradigm, and that this lack of insight is one of the key distinctions between theory and practice.

Although the validity of the functionalist paradigm may not be questioned at the practitioner level, it is widely challenged on a theoretical level. Prominent theorists such as Ciszek (2015); Coombs and Holladay (2012a, 2012b), Demetrious (2013), Dozier and Lauzen (2000), Edwards (2015), Edwards and Hodges (2011), Fawkes (2018), Fitch (2013), Holtzhäusen (2000, 2013), Jansen Curry (2016), Kent and Taylor (2016), L’Etang (2015, 2016), Macnamara (2012), Moloney and McGrath (2020), O’Brien (2018), Pompper (2011), Weaver (2013) and Valentini, Kruckeberg, and Starck (2012) have all mounted a challenge to the dominance of the functionalist approach. While these theorists are not an entirely homogeneous group Jansen Curry (2016) proposes that they have two tenets in common. First they are critical of the US centred dominance of the field of public relations, particularly its disregard for local contexts and “its specious claim to have created a universalistic approach to the field based upon scientific methodologies” (p. 162). Second they question the validity of the “excellence paradigm” (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) because it provides no opportunity—or mandate—for public relations practitioners to reflect on and modify their practice in response to differences in power and influence among interest groups. Demetrious (2013) claims that the blind acceptance of the functionalist approach to practice is not only naïve but also potentially detrimental to the development of a morally just society because the functionalist paradigm has been developed “to justify the control of contradictions between and through public and private discourses in order to maintain a dominant position of privilege and influence” (2013, p.138). Surma and Demetrious (2018) further argue that functional public relations has been pivotal in laying the foundations for neoliberal ideology to become accepted as part of mainstream (Western) ideology and reasoning.

The theorists’ challenge to the functionalist approach to public relations is enabled by a perceptual broadening of the role, location and social context of public relations practice. This broadening permits researchers to identify an influence of public relations beyond organisational contexts. Edwards and Hodges (2011) describe this broadened framing of public relations as the “socio-cultural turn” (p.1). Demetrious (2013, p.139) describes it as emerging “differentiated understandings” about the nature of public relations. This broadening is enabling theorists to interpret activism as a component of, or even synonymous with, public relations, because both are forms of strategic communication that employ specific strategies and tactics for social change. Ciszek (2015, 2017) reframes public relations as a relational process that involves ongoing persuasive transactions with other social entities. From this perspective activism and public relations are not separate but

communicative acts taking place in a “fluid environment informed by cultural-economic forces” (Ciszek, 2015, p.1).

The perceptual breaking down of the organisation/activist binary that is occurring on a theoretical level has implications at a practice level because it enables the tactics used by activists to be discussed as a valid form of public relations practice, and public relations tactics to be regarded as making a powerful contribution to activism. From a functionalist perspective, activists are positioned as unwanted publics, or challenges that the organisation needs to manage in order to fulfil its objectives (Coombs & Holladay, 2012b). From this perspective where the tactics used by activists, such as protests, petitions, sit-ins, have featured in the public relations curriculum, they have been positioned as negative activities, their impact to be mitigated by the public relations practitioner (Deegan, 2001). Dozier and Lauzen (2000) described this as the ‘modern positivist threat approach’ to public relations. More recent research has shown that public relations practitioners and activists use many of the same approaches such as stakeholder analysis and media outreach (Ciszek, 2015; Weaver, 2013), and have been doing so for over a century (Coombs & Holladay, 2012a). Young (2016) goes so far as to describe activism as “public relations in its most developed form” (p. 470).

There is theoretical recognition that the conflation of activism and public relations may play a role in assuaging professional and personal tensions related to the practice of public relations in an increasingly complex and socially aware society. Many scholars herald the breaking down of the binary between activism and public relations as an opportunity for the field of public relations to be perceived as playing a more emancipatory role in society (Coombs & Holladay, 2012a, 2012b; Edwards, 2012, 2015; Edwards & Hodges, 2011; Fawkes, 2018; Holtzhäusen, 2000, 2013; L’Etang, 2013; L’Etang & Pieczka, 2006; Neill & Drumwright, 2012; Pompper, 2011). On a practitioner level the emerging reinterpretation of the relationship between public relations and activism has been theorised as a way for practitioners to reconcile personal ethical tensions associated with their practice. Practitioners can position themselves as internal activists who can hold their organisations to account (Holtzhäusen, 2013; Holtzhäusen & Voto, 2002; Pompper, 2011). Of note for this article is that there is limited theoretical discussion about the unique professional tensions that public relations teachers might face, or theorising about the role that activism studies might play in assuaging these professional tensions.

Theorists are describing not only a broadening of the scope of public relations, but also a more nuanced view of the field of activism. Early representations of activists depicted them as a contagious mob that engaged collectively in highly emotional, often disruptive behaviour (Atkinson, 2017). Recent studies have shown, however, that activists cannot be theorised as a homogeneous category, and that they make extensive use of public relations strategies and tactics, which over time have been refined, methodised and placed within organisational parameters (Coombs & Holladay, 2012a; Stoeckle, 2018; Wolf, 2019; Young, 2016). Moloney and McKie (2015) differentiate activism into two forms of public relations: dissent and protest. Protest public relations seeks to enact change within the political process, whereas dissent public relations works on a wider social scale beyond the political process. They describe the increased awareness of and theorising about the strategies and tactics of activists as the ‘activist turn’ (2016).

It is significant to note that while public relations theorists are interested in ‘bridging the gap’ (Ciszek, 2015) between activism and public relations, activists and activism theorists rarely reciprocate this interest or even acknowledge the role that public relations tactics play in their planning or action. A range of texts written by highly experienced activists (for example, Atkinson, 2017; Gay, 2016; Göncü, Saka, & Sayan, 2018; Ollis, 2012; Ricketts, 2012; Ryan & Jeffreys, 2019; Shaw, 2013; Yanacopoulos, 2015) acknowledge the importance of strategic communication, discuss the use of specific strategies and tactics such as humour and media relations, consider theory related to the practice and analysis of social movements and resistance, and yet make no mention of

the term public relations. Choudry (2015) makes the point that activist texts are generally most concerned with theorising the lived experience and perceptions of those who are learning, organising and acting in struggles for social change. Activist texts indicate that not only are activists unaware of what public relations can offer their practice, but they specifically seek to emphasise the binary nature of the two fields. In the few occasions where public relations is mentioned in such texts it is done so disparagingly. Many theorists make the point that activists fail to identify their strategic communication activities as public relations because of its association with big business, manipulation and undemocratic practice (Ciszek, 2017; L'Etang, 2016; Reyes, 2018; Weaver, 2018; Wolf, 2019). As Demetrious (2013) notes, "the activist literature would rather not recognise the utilization of processes similar to those of the ruling class" (p. 104).

The important point for this article is that, while the curricular dominance of the functionalist paradigm does not seem to be a concern for practitioners (nor, as will be addressed in the following section, for the professional bodies associated with public relations), the dominance of this paradigm places public relations educators in an awkward position. They find themselves obliged to teach a curriculum where concepts such as media relations, the strategic planning cycle, and issues management are applied predominantly for the betterment of those who can afford to pay for their services, and this, by default, endorses a neo-liberal agenda. For many educators this is at odds with their professional obligations to contribute to the development of a successful society. Edwards (2015) wrote, with reference to the division between functionalist and pro-social approaches: "No matter where public relations has been taught, this divide has emerged to a greater or lesser extent, and has marked the ways in which scholars have both collaborated and competed for the power to shape the field" (p.17). The theoretical questioning of the functionalist paradigm, and the theoretical conflation of activism and public relations together provide an opportunity for public relations teachers to carve out new curricular territory that may go some way towards resolving this tension.

While this 'conflation' (Weaver, 2018) of activism and public relations is gathering increased momentum on a theoretical level, the lack of recognition of the contribution that activists have made to the practice of public relations is a 'glaring omission' (Coombs & Holladay, 2012b), particularly in the case of US public relations (Adi, 2018), and this omission is also reflected in public relations curricula and pedagogy. The following section examines the extent to which the theoretical conflation of activism and public relations is reflected in public relations curricula and pedagogy. It addresses the dominance of the functionalist perspective in public relations curricula and considers what the implications are for public relations teachers, particularly those who are conscious of their professional obligation to positively direct social change.

3. Public relations pedagogy – professional tensions

The previous section addressed some of the complexities and opportunities associated with the theoretical conflation of public relations and activism. From a functionalist perspective, activists are positioned as a problematic public who must be managed in order to fulfil organisational objectives, whereas critical/pro-social public relations theory embraces activism studies as a legitimate concept and practice. While the limitations associated with the dominance of the functionalist paradigm, and the associated negative perceptions of public relations practice, are widely discussed among critical theorists, there is little acknowledgment of the professional tensions that public relations teachers face when called upon to unreflectively perpetuate the functionalist paradigm, particularly those who want to participate in teaching that contributes to the development of a well-functioning liberal democracy. This section identifies the forces shaping public relations' pedagogy and curricula, with particular reference to teachers' professional agency (or lack of) in influencing learning outcomes.

Teachers, as a professional group, embrace pedagogical excellence as much more than the transmission of trade skills. Underpinning all excellent pedagogy are the profound ideas of seminal educationalists such as Bernstein (1996); Dewey (1938) and Freire (2013). These emancipatory educationalists all acknowledge the central role that formal education plays in positively influencing social change, and argue that teachers are professionally obliged to work on behalf of humanity and play a role in addressing social inequities. The dominance of the functionalist curriculum must be a source of tension for any reflective public relations teacher because, regardless of claims of functional neutrality, public relations practice is always political (Holtzhäusen, 2013), and public relations inevitably "expresses the negative sides of civil society where special pleading and structural inequalities are reinforced" (Moloney, 2006, p.10).

One constraint that public relations teachers face is that public relations curricula are dictated by the public relations divisions of the scholarly associations associated with public relations, particularly in the US. Unlike the professions of nursing, medicine, social work and law, which are guided by professional bodies specifically associated with teaching in their fields, public relations teachers do not have their own independent code of ethics or recognition of their professional status. There is limited recognition on the part of the professional bodies associated with the field of public relations that public relations teachers are professionals with their own obligations to pursue pedagogical excellence, and there is little consideration of the complexity of teachers' conflicting obligations, or recognition of their legitimate role as agents of social transformation.

Despite longstanding calls for change research into public relations pedagogy is sparse, pedagogical tools are weak and teacher training is minimal (Coombs & Rybacki, 1999). In particular very little is known about the extent to which public relations teachers are aware of, or qualified in, pedagogical scholarship and teaching philosophy. While there has been some research into the history of public relations courses (Fitch, 2016; L'Etang & Pieczka, 2006) there has been limited research into the backgrounds and pedagogical qualifications of public relations educators. What research there is indicates that the majority of public relations educators come from practice (Pompper, 2011). There is a divide between those public relations educators with primarily practical experience and those who are research active. In the US there is considerable reliance on adjunct staff who are constrained by their willingness and ability to experiment with the curriculum because of their reliance on student feedback for career progression (Pompper, 2011). The implications of this for curricula reform are significant because research shows that public relations teachers, particularly adjunct staff, have limited agency over the curriculum and limited agency over their pedagogical approach (Kent & Taylor, 2005; Pompper, 2011)."

Although critical approaches to public relations are prominent at a theoretical level, these have had limited influence on the practice or, of particular importance to this article, the teaching of public relations (Curry Jansen, 2016; Dozier & Lauzen, 2000; Edwards, 2015; Fitch, 2016; Holtzhäusen, 2013; Moloney, 2006). Researchers point out that public relations pedagogy remains focused on public relations' quest to be recognised as a legitimate profession, and the associated emphasis on credentialising (Fitch, 2016; L'Etang & Pieczka, 2006; L'Etang, 2016). In fact, writing in the Australian context, Fitch (2016) points out that the Public Relations Institution of Australia (PRIA) is seeking an even more influential role in regulating public relations curricula through providing specific direction to universities. Pedagogical initiatives are emerging, such as incorporating values and ethics education (Austin & Toth, 2011; Bowen & Erzikova, 2013; Waymer, 2012) and balancing conceptual knowledge and skills based knowledge (Azionya et al., 2019; Taylor, 2011), but these tend to be located within the functionalist curriculum. New programmes that include the social, cultural and political effects of public relations work are emerging but these are taught primarily at postgraduate level (Edwards, 2015).

A highly influential force in shaping public relations curricula is the push towards credentialisation as an essential element in the achievement of professional status (Fawkes, 2015). The powerful credentialising bodies that seek to codify the field of public relations dominate and frame public relations curricula, and are motivated to a large degree by the pursuit of professional status (Fawkes, 2015; Fitch, 2016). The Capabilities Framework, completed by the [Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communications Management](#) in 2018, recommended core professional capabilities for entry level and mid/senior-level practitioners, and was specifically developed to inform curricula and educate for the future of the profession (Manley & Valin, 2017). Gregory and Fawkes (2019) describe the Framework as a checklist for re-calibrating credentialing schemes or curriculum standards. While the Framework does refer to higher level learning, such as the capacity to reflect critically and apply independent and ethical judgement in complex situations, these capabilities are positioned within the professional boundaries of the field of public relations. The Capabilities are not based on a scholarly pedagogical rationale, nor were public relations teachers particularly involved in the co-creation of the curriculum. Of note is a Swedish university that declined to participate in using the Framework because “higher education should not have to follow detailed requirements because the core in the education design is based on analysis, generic knowledge, and critical and independent thinking” (Gregory et al., 2018).

Another highly influential body in framing undergraduate public relations curricula is the [Commission on Public Relations Education \(2017\)](#). This body, which represents the key international professional organisations, researches the gap between public relations curricula and industry expectations of entry-level professionals in order to inform curricula. The Commission describe itself as “the authoritative voice on public relations education” (FAST FORWARD: The 2017 Report on Undergraduate Public Relations Education), and its brief is to develop new goals, curricula, pedagogical techniques and assessment tools to help prepare graduates for emerging challenges. The Commission’s most recent report (2017) emphasises that new graduates should have a wide range of functional skills such as digital literacy, research, writing, strategic thinking and financial literacy. The recommendations do also include essential soft skills such as self-awareness, adaptability and assertiveness, and an added emphasis on ethics but this is located within specific campaigns and within the client-practitioner relationship. As with the Capabilities Framework, the Commission does not initiate any curricula requirement to reflect ethically on public relations’ wider social, cultural and political responsibilities in respect of power inequities.

For those public relations teachers who feel professionally obliged to direct social change and examine social inequities, particularly the power implications of unequal communication resources, the constraints imposed by the professional associations must be a source of tension. The pedagogical approach advocated by the professional associations is transactional, based on a traditional conservative model of instruction where the student is the passive recipient of information. At no point in the recommendations from the professional associations is there the opportunity for a critical pedagogical approach where the student is encouraged to reflect on the broader social influence and power inequities associated with the tools of public relations. This is not to suggest that the bodies associated with professionalising public relations are not interested in the idea of incorporating social principles into their credentialising programmes. The Global Alliances’ Declaration of Principles (2006) specifically states: “A profession is distinguished by certain characteristics or attributes, including acceptance of duties to a broader society than merely one’s clients/employers” (The Global Alliances’ Declaration of Principles, p.1). The above statement is qualified by stating: “In serving the interest of clients and employers, we dedicate ourselves to the goals of better communication, understanding, and cooperation among diverse individuals, groups, and institutions of society” (The Global Alliances’ Declaration of Principles, p. 4). Holtzhausen (2015) claims that the professional bodies are obsessed with lists

of encoded principles, and these have the effect of moving ethical responsibility away from the individual to the group. This avoidance of individual ethical responsibility is reflected in the textbooks recommended by the professional associations that “rhapsodize about ethical codes and visions of redemptive credentialing protocols [but include] barely a word about ethical breaches, even though the largest public relations firms in the world committed most of them” (Curry Jansen, 2016, p. 167). In other words, despite claims of broader social responsibility, public relations’ professional bodies clearly endorse the idea that the primary professional loyalty is to what Duffy (2000) describes as ‘invisible clients’.

The professional complexities faced by public relations teachers are accentuated by an inconvenient truth. Teachers are preparing students to enter a field of practice that continues to be widely portrayed in popular culture as “monolithic and utterly toxic” (Fawkes, 2018, p. 159), “often the butt of politicians’ and journalists’ derision” (L’Etang, 2013, p.1), and arrogant, unethical and politically offensive (Demetrius, 2013). As Coombs and Holladay ask: “When was the last time you heard public relations referred to in a way that did not imply something negative?” (2013, p. 6). These aspersions appear to be overlooked by the professional bodies associated with public relations teaching (Coombs & Holladay, 2012b), but leave many public relations teachers who are proud of their work and reflective about their practice experiencing a number of professional tensions, and ambivalent about their field of teaching and research (Moloney & McGrath, 2020).

There are indications that public relations teachers have attempted to assuage, even unconsciously, their professional qualms about being required to unreflectively prepare students for a role in industry. Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) well known model depicting public relations practice as evolving from asymmetrical towards symmetrical power relations has been widely critiqued and dismissed (Duffy, 2000; Fawkes, 2018; Heath, 2006; Kent & Taylor, 2007; L’Etang, 2013; Moloney & McGrath, 2020; Moloney, 2006; Wolf, 2019), yet it remains a dominant theoretical construct in public relations curricula. One of the reasons speculated for its persistence is that it allows teachers to present the field of public relations as progressing in a socially positive direction, and publics as influential co-creators of meaning rather than passive recipients of strategic messaging. For teachers this provides a ‘feel good’ factor allowing public relations to be presented as an ethical, corrective force (Curry Jansen, 2016; L’Etang, 2013; Moloney & McGrath, 2020), and avoids the need for difficult discussions about public relations’ involvement with historical or contemporary propaganda because it presents the field as moving towards harmony (Fawkes, 2018).

Another influence that limits the professional agency of public relations teachers, and endorses the functionalist curriculum, is the expectation on the part of public relations students, their families, and industry that public relations curricula should be directly related to employability, and closely aligned with the community of practice of public relations practitioners (Edwards, 2015; Hatherell & Bartlett, 2006; Macnamara, Zerfass, Adi, & Lwin, 2018). Universities actively market their industry links and their ability to prepare students to be workplace ready by promoting work integrated learning initiatives such as internships, and encouraging practitioner participation in advisory committees and guest lectures (Fitch, 2016; Peltola, 2018). As a result, most tertiary public relations courses are ‘campaign courses’ (Holladay & Coombs, 2013)—courses that teach students how to create public relations actions. This privileging of work integrated learning fosters public relations curricula, particularly in the West, to be dominated by the functionalist approach (Macnamara, 2012), which limits the pedagogical agency of the public relations teacher.

Theorists’ calls for a radical rethink about how public relations practitioners come to “identify, define, and understand the discipline” (Ciszek, 2018, p.1), are not matched by parallel calls from an educational perspective. There are no calls from public relations’ professional associations to encourage public relations students to reflect upon the broader role public relations plays in society. Unlike professions as such

as nursing, teaching, law and medicine public relations remains primarily a vocational discipline focused on training students to achieve employability skills. Public relations teachers find themselves in the difficult position of endorsing a field that they have little influence in shaping. They have limited agency to encourage students to reflect deeply on the wider contextual social norms and power imbalances associated with the public relations industry, and the socio-political-economic impacts of public relations in everyday life. In fact the functionalist approach is reliant on curricular minimisation of the wider historical and social context in which organisations and practitioners operate (Coombs & Holladay, 2012a, 2012b; Demetrious, 2013; Dozier & Lauzen, 2000; Kent & Taylor, 2016). The following section proposes the inclusion of activism studies as an element of the public relations curriculum that might broaden the functionalist curriculum and alleviate some of the professional tensions that reflective public relations teachers face.

4. Incorporating activism studies into public relations curricula

The discussion in this article has raised the question: if a close relationship between activism and public relations is compelling from a theoretical point of view, then why not from a pedagogical point of view? Why is it that activist perspectives, strategies, case studies and role models do not feature more significantly in public relations curricula, and why is this possibility not acknowledged among the professional bodies associated with public relations education? This article is not advocating for an activist pedagogy through which students are taught to become activists. Nor is it proposing that a critical/pro-social approach should replace the functional element of public relations curricula. Instead it proposes that the functionalist curriculum is prised open to 'make space' (Edwards, 2015) for activism studies as an element of the curriculum.

Despite this proposal that activism studies should be an element of public relations curricula, it is important to note that this article is not proposing that activism studies be taught uncritically. Both Adi (2018) and L'Etang (2016) warn that the uncritical inclusion of activism studies in the curriculum is an easy option for those teachers who wish to challenge the functionalist paradigm, because activism studies naturally incorporates a range of historical and social-cultural perspectives such as social movement analysis, critical analysis of power relationships and hegemonic discourses, and a focus on ethics and social justice. L'Etang (2015) warns against glorifying activist practices. L'Etang points out that activists are often highly emotionally engaged in their causes and therefore not particularly reflective about their actions. L'Etang also argues that activists often refuse to acknowledge critiques of persuasive communication, cultism, unethical behaviour, violence and propaganda. Activist case studies can also be inappropriate for inclusion as exemplars because activists use tactics that are not considered to be ethically appropriate and that may violate or transgress social norms or laws, such as violent resistance and civil disobedience (Ganesh & Zoller, 2012; Sommerfeldt, Kent, & Taylor, 2012).

The proposal that public relations curricula should incorporate activism studies is aligned with calls from prominent public relations theorists to broaden the theoretical base of public relations and thereby develop the maturity and social legitimacy of the profession, particularly as social changes are forcing imminent and urgent change in practice (Adi, 2018; Demetrious, 2013; Holtzhäusen, 2013). As Coombs and Holladay (2012a, p. 1) state: "Although we see it [the incorporation of activism studies into the curriculum] as central to broadening students' education, it also holds promise for re-imagining the field and legitimizing the works of activists as an important component in public relations theory and research." There have been repeated calls for the field of public relations to position itself within macro social theory in the context of wider social shifts, particularly those that emerge at disruptive points in history (L'Etang, 2016). L'Etang (2015) claims that this "longer lens" (p. 31) may bring about a desirable pedagogical shift.

Fawkes (2018) addresses the need to celebrate 'hybridity' in the field, while Macnamara (2015) calls for the incorporation of "new theories and models to continue the process of knowledge construction that is necessary for disciplinary progress" (p. 344). Edwards (2012) makes the point that, rather than looking for exclusivity, the incorporation of a wider range of paradigms and perspectives can be interpreted as a sign of maturity for the field of public relations as it shows responsiveness to new ideas.

Public relations education has traditionally relied heavily on case studies as normative exemplars of good practice. Such case studies have tended to favour the corporate business sector, with some inclusion of governmental and not-for-profit examples. Many of these case studies are narrowly organisationally focussed, and do not encourage dialogue and debate (L'Etang, 2016). This article proposes the formal inclusion in the public relations curriculum of case studies that examine the attitudes, strategies and tactics of activists. Coombs and Holladay (2012b) claim that this action would be appropriate because all successful activist movements are founded in public relations, even though activist practice tends to be developed through persistent trial and error rather than with reference to theoretical models. Despite the fact that activist groups tend to have underdeveloped notions of publics and messaging (Choudry, 2015), the two fields are both focussed on how publics are discursively created and sustained. Ciszek (2018) makes the point that, like public relations, successful activist strategic decision-making involves segmenting stakeholders around demographic and psychographic categories.

Activist case studies naturally incorporate a critical element in the curriculum because they help to develop understandings of social systems by drawing from the experiences and perspectives of those who traditionally have been silenced, excluded, and/or marginalized in the production and dissemination of knowledge (L'Etang, 2015). L'Etang (2016) makes the point that public relations education's heavy reliance on corporate case studies has led to a lack of broader historical contextualising in public relations curricula. Traditionally any activist case studies included in public relations textbooks tended to represent activists oppositionally. A recent analysis of public relations textbooks shows that this oppositional approach is slowly changing, with an emerging trend to include examples of activist campaigns that have successfully used public relations strategies to bring about change and resist organisational pressure, and a marked increase in the available number of case studies that examine activism as exemplars of public relations practice (Mules, 2019).

Public relations theorists have suggested that analysis of the communication strategies and tactics of activist groups can contribute positively to public relations curricula because activists are often very successful at applying strategies and tactics to optimise their success and influence public opinion. Activists are adept at developing complex media strategies, public education and government lobbying campaigns, and using sophisticated digital strategies (Doan & Toledano, 2018; Heath, 2013; Stokes & Atkins-Sayre, 2018; Weaver, 2018). Successful activism requires leaders to nurture and sustain a network that often comprises people who may not share common values, or the skills to keep volunteers dedicated and applied (Reyes, 2018). There have been calls for a pedagogical shift from the traditional highly contextualised, technical case studies that demonstrate public relations' value to business towards a broader focus on social dynamics (Coombs & Holladay, 2012b; L'Etang, 2015). The incorporation of activism has the potential to expand the public relations curriculum to focus on new areas such as the stages of social movements (Heath, 2006). Coombs and Holladay (2012b) call for the inclusion of activist examples such as the union movement, the suffrage movement, the civil rights movement, the feminist movement and, more recently, environmental movements. There are now numerous analyses of how activists effectively use public relations strategies, for example the Save Beelihar Wetlands campaign (Wolf, 2019), the London riots of 2011 (Anderson, 2017; Capozzi & Spector, 2016), the public relations battle between Colorado GASP and

Philip Morris (Stokes & Rubin, 2010), and a historical analysis of how activists used public relations strategies and tactics to curtail venereal disease (O'Brien, 2018).

This section has addressed how a pedagogical approach that incorporates activism studies as a domain within public relations curricula could contribute to the development of a more emancipatory element in public relations teaching. It could provide opportunities for curricula to engage with issues of social justice and with the intersectional complexities of race, class and gender oppression, as well as offering both students and teachers a way to address uncomfortable binaries and complexities.

5. Conclusion

This article has considered why, when theorists recognise significant overlaps between the fields of activism and public relations, and question the legitimacy of the functionalist paradigm, are these concerns not reflected in public relations curricula? It has proposed incorporating activism studies in public relations curricula as an opportunity to 'create space' (Edwards, 2012) for new pedagogical approaches, and new ways of identifying, defining, and understanding the discipline (Ciszek, 2018), and providing a potential platform for public relations to redefine its social role and redress historical practice.

Representative bodies are striving to improve the professional status of public relations, but they cannot do it alone, and they cannot do it without facing the challenges surrounding public relations' social legitimacy. Change has to occur in the grassroots discourse. The suggestion that the motivations, strategies and tactics of activists could be studied as exemplars of good practice may not seem radical to those outside the field, but it is deeply challenging to established professional expectations. The inclusion of activism studies could go some way toward providing teachers, students and emerging practitioners with a platform to engage in the important social conversations about the role that public relations plays in issues of social justice, and the responsibilities that sit alongside mastery of the powerful communicative tools of public relations.

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